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# HUMAN FERTILITY IN LATIN AMERICA

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# HUMAN FERTILITY IN LATIN AMERICA

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1. Since this paper regards a particular demographic aspect of Latin America, it seems opportune to give some initial information on the delimitation of this region and on its population.

2. According to the current definition, Latin America includes the continental part of America south of the frontier between the United States and Mexico, the Antilles and the minor islands of Central and South America. On its area of 20.3 million square kilometers, 206.5 million inhabitants were living as of mid-year, with an average density of 10.2 inhabitants per square kilometer.

3. In 1850, Latin America had only 33 million inhabitants; in 1950, it had already 162 million; in the course of a century, the population increased five-fold. In the following ten years, there was a further increase of 46.5 million, or 28.7 percent.

4. However, in 1960 Latin America held only 7.1 percent of world population (2,990 million). The low demographic density indicates the ample possibilities of further peopling offered by this region, where vast habitable areas, rich in natural resources, are scarcely utilized, or are even still unexplored.

5. The ethnic composition of Latin America's populations is extremely varied. The descendents of the aborigines, from many different stocks, prevail in some places; the descendents of the first colonisers, mostly Spanish and Portuguese, in others. In many places, the recent immigration - Italian, Iberian, and of other European or Asiatic origins - has a strong, direct or indirect, representation; in many others, the descendents of the slaves who were imported, during more than three centuries, from Africa are numerous and in some cases predominant. The fusion of the different ethnic groups has produced, over the generations, manifold combinations, so that a large part of the population is not amenable to any precise ethnical classification.

6. The degree of culture and of material progress varies widely: between Argentina or Uruguay, on the one hand, and Guatemala or Haiti, on the other, there are differences not less deep than those which separate the advanced West European countries and the backward Central African ones; and within these extremes many intermediate grades are represented. Furthermore, the different parts of each country often present great cultural and economic differences, such as those in Brazil between São Paulo state, already well advanced in industrialization, and the northern Territories, where the prevailing activity is still the gathering of spontaneously occurring natural products.

7. While during the second half of the last century and the first fifteen years of this century immigration had made a large contribution to the population increase of several Latin American countries, after the first World War this contribution decreased in absolute numbers, and even more in relative importance; and it diminished further after the second World War, while the natural increase became larger because of the downward trend of death rates.

8. In the 1950-1960 decade, the number of live births amounted to about 75 million and the number of deaths to about 31 million, so that there was an excess of births over deaths of 44 million, which made up 94 percent of the population increase during this period.

a) With a birth rate of 42 and a death rate of 18 per 1,000 population, the rate of natural increase reached 24 per 1,000, while the world average was 17 per 1,000.

b) The high level of the Latin America birth rate, more than double of the corresponding Europe rate, makes the study of human fertility in this region particularly interesting.

9. Some remarks on the accuracy of birth statistics are indispensable for their right interpretation.

a) In many Latin American countries births and deaths records are still more or less incomplete, and therefore the vital statistics become also incomplete. The families often omit the declaration of births; the registry offices sometimes do not give information, or complete information, to the statistical departments; thus the lack of civic and administrative discipline contributes to the vital the inaccuracy statistics data.

b) In Brazil, for instance, the number of births occurred in 1958 was - according to a very prudent estimate - about 2,800,000; less than 1,400,000 of them appear in the official statistics for the same year (which, however, includes other 1,500,000 births occurred in former years but registered only in 1958). According to the Annário Estatístico do Brasil, 1,550 of the 6,501 birth registration offices sent only incomplete information and 617 did not send any information to the statistical departments.

c) In some countries - Mexico, Argentina and others - the deficiencies of vital statistics are much less than in Brazil, but in others they are very large, and there are even some - Cuba, Haiti - which do not have, or do not publish, any birth statistics at all.

d) Therefore, the calculation of birth and fertility rates on the basis of vital statistics generally leads to errors.

10. Notwithstanding the incompleteness of birth statistics, the birth rates calculated according to these data are very high in most countries of Latin America, exceeding 40 per 1,000 population in twelve of them and 30 in six others. The birth rates of twenty countries are given in table 1 (At page 3).

11. Apparent birth rates between 49 and 45 per 1,000 population are found in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Salvador, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela; between 44 and 40, in Brazil (estimate based on census data), Colombia, Nicaragua, Honduras, Dominican Republic and Panama. At least in some of these countries the true birth rates are even higher than the high apparent ones.

12. With apparent birth rates between 38 and 33 per 1,000 comes Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica; Bolivia and Peru (in these two countries the true rates probably exceed 40 per 1,000); Chile and Puerto Rico.

13. In the two River Plate republics, the apparent birth rates, only slightly below the true ones, are very low by comparison with those for the other Latin American countries. The Argentinian true rate of 26 per 1,000 is near to that of Canada and the Uruguayan rate of 20 per 1,000 is near to the European average.

14. If we compare the birth rates of 40 to 49 per 1,000, which prevail in Latin America, with those of 15 to 19 per 1,000, that predominate in Western Europe, we clearly see the retardation of our region in the demographic revolution, by which the birth rate is being gradually but rapidly adapted to the decrease of the death rate due to the progress of medical science and health organization.

15. The general fertility rates calculated on the basis of official statistics - such as those given in table 1 - are also very high in many Latin American countries, although often inferior to the true ones. In twelve of these countries the annual number of live births per 1,000 women of childbearing age (15 to 49 years) exceeds 170 and in six others 130.

16. The highest values of this rate, of the order of 200 per 1,000, are found in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Ecuador; values between 189 and 173 per 1,000 in Salvador, Venezuela, Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Brazil, Panama and Dominican Republic.

17. Lower values, between 166 and 134 per 1,000, are observed in Trinidad and Tobago, Peru, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Bolivia and Chile; but in Peru and Bolivia the true rates probably are much higher than the apparent ones (154 and 141).

18. In Argentina, the apparent general fertility rate falls to 95 per 1,000 and the true rate is probably about 100, that is, very near to that of the United States and below that of Canada.

Birth rates, general fertility rates and child-woman ratios[a]

TABLE 1

| COUNTRY | PERIOD | LIVE BIRTHS | | Population under 10 years of age per 1000 female population ages 15-49 years |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | per 1000 population | per 1000 women ages 15-49 years | |
| COSTA RICA | 1957-59 | 48.8 | 206.1 | 1,352 |
| SALVADOR | 1957-59 | 47.3 | 189.1 | 1,162 |
| GUATEMALA | 1957-59 | 49.3 | 203.1 | 1,258 |
| HONDURAS | 1957-59 | 42.6 | 180.2 | 1,216 |
| MEXICO | 1956-58 | 45.6 | 185.3 | 1,204 |
| NICARAGUA | 1957-59 | 42.9 | 181.9 | 1,406 |
| PANAMA | 1957-59 | 40.5 | 173.6 | 1,300 |
| JAMAICA | 1954-56 | 36.2 | 141.6 | 1,051 |
| PUERTO RICO | 1957-59 | 32.6 | 142.4 | 1,355 |
| DOMINICAN REPUBLIC | 1957-59 | 40.6 | 172.9 | 1,343 |
| TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO | 1957-59 | 37.6 | 166.1 | 1,366 |
| ARGENTINA | 1955-57 | 24.8 | 94.8 | 821 |
| BOLIVIA | 1953-55 | 35.4 | 141.1 | 1,189 |
| BRAZIL | 1950 | 43.5 | 176.2 | 1,200 |
| CHILE | 1955-57 | 34.2 | 133.9 | 1,033 |
| COLOMBIA | 1957-59 | 43.3 | 179.3 | 1,268 |
| ECUADOR | 1956-58 | 46.6 | 197.2 | 1,306 |
| PERU | 1956-58 | 38.9 | 154.0 | 1,402 |
| URUGUAY | 1953-54 | 19.0 | ... | ... |
| VENEZUELA | 1954-56 | 48.9 | 188.8 | 1,287 |

Rates calculated according to data of UNITED NATIONS, Demographic Yearbook, 1959, except for Brazil (author's estimates).

19. Except in the cases of Argentina and Uruguay, the general fertility rate predominant in Latin America is more than double of the prevailing rate in Western Europe.

20. Although the Latin American censuses are not free from errors, in some cases their data rectify the information obtained by the calculation of the general birth and fertility rates. To this purpose, it may be useful to calculate the ratio between the number of children ages 0 to 9 years and the number of women of childbearing age, which, although depending also on mortality in the infantile ages, may be taken as a rather reliable index of fertility.

21. This child-woman ratio (its values are given in table 1) attains very high values in some countries which do not have very high apparent birth and fertility rates: for instance, 1,402 per 1,000 in Peru, where the apparent birth rate is only 35 per 1,000 population, in comparison with 1,258 per 1,000 in Guatemala, where the apparent birth rate is 49; and 1,189 per 1,000 in Bolivia (apparent birth rate 35), in comparison with 1,162 in Salvador (apparent birth rate 47).

22. In fifteen of the Latin American countries for which we have census data, the value of the child-woman ratio exceeds 1,200, while in Western Europe values of the order of 600 per 1,000 are prevailing. Only in Argentina (and probably in Uruguay, for which there is no census), the value of this ratio is lower than that observed in the United States (821 in comparison with 932 per 1,000).

23. The calculation of age-specific fertility rates may lead in some cases to even less reliable results, caused not only by the incompleteness of birth statistics, but also by lack of information on the age of some mothers and by errors in the age declarations of others.

24. However, this calculation is useful, as the differences between the fertility levels predominant in Latin America and those prevailing in the other regions of Western culture are so wide, that they generally become visible in spite of the deficiencies of the statistical documentation. Age-specific fertility rates, by five-years groups, in nineteen Latin American countries, are given in table 2 (At page 5).

25. For the 15-19 years age group, the fertility rate exceeds 100 per 1,000 in ten of the nineteen countries, attaining maxima of 148 to 144 in Panama, Trinidad and Tobago and Guatemala, while it remains below 100 in the United States and much lower in several Western European countries. The rates of 72 and 57 per 1,000 observed in Chile and in Argentina reflect a really low fertility, but those of 70 and 49 per 1,000 calculated for Peru and Bolivia are probably much below the true values.

26. In the 20-24 years group, the fertility rate rises strongly; it exceeds 290 per 1,000 in twelve countries, attaining its maximum of 320 in Nicaragua, Trinidad and Tobago, while in the United States it reaches only 255 and in Western Europe the maxima of France, England and Wales almost coincide with the Latin America minimum (193, Argentina).

27. The fertility rate rises further in the 25-29 years group, in thirteen countries, and declines in six others. In fourteen countries it exceeds 250 per 1,000, attaining 312 in Costa Rica, 307 in Guatemala, 305 in Salvador, while in the United States it drops to 198. Even the Argentinian minimum, 177, is slightly higher than the Western European maximum, observed in France.

28. In the 30-34 years group, the fertility rate is everywhere lower than in the preceding group, but it still exceeds 200 per 1,000 in eleven countries, attaining its maximum of 283 in Guatemala, while in the United States it falls to 117 and in several Western European countries it is even lower. The Latin American minimum, 122 per 1,000, is found, once more, in Argentina.

29. A further strong decrease of the fertility rate is observed in the 35-39 years group, but in ten countries the rate still exceeds 150 per 1,000, attaining the maximum of 214 in Costa Rica, while in the United States it declines to 80 and in some countries of Western Europe it falls below 50. The Latin American minimum is represented by the Argentinian rate, 76 per 1,000.

## Age-specific Fertility Rates*

TABLE 2

| COUNTRY | LIVE BIRTHS PER 1000 WOMEN AGED | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 15-19 years | 20-24 years | 25-29 years | 30-34 years | 35-39 years | 40-44 years | 45-49 years |
| COSTA RICA | 115.8 | 313.5 | 311.5 | 262.6 | 214.0 | 79.4 | 14.4 |
| SALVADOR | 129.1 | 275.2 | 305.3 | 243.7 | 181.3 | 54.6 | 12.3 |
| GUATEMALA | 144.0 | 270.8 | 307.1 | 264.4 | 188.1 | 75.1 | 15.2 |
| HONDURAS | 127.7 | 261.0 | 288.3 | 231.4 | 156.7 | 59.9 | 16.1 |
| MEXICO | 107.9 | 288.8 | 298.4 | 264.1 | 159.9 | 58.3 | 15.1 |
| NICARAGUA | 127.9 | 319.9 | 287.9 | 178.5 | 141.5 | 48.5 | 12.1 |
| PANAMA | 148.0 | 291.6 | 259.5 | 176.0 | 114.0 | 40.2 | 8.9 |
| JAMAICA | 123.0 | 264.0 | 235.8 | 156.3 | 91.6 | 36.1 | 3.9 |
| PUERTO RICO | 99.2 | 237.1 | 198.5 | 156.2 | 113.2 | 36.4 | 13.2 |
| DOMINICAN REPUBLIC | 83.5 | 244.5 | 300.5 | 229.1 | 143.2 | 79.8 | 28.8 |
| TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO | 146.6 | 318.9 | 259.0 | 180.5 | 116.0 | 35.7 | 4.8 |
| ARGENTINA | 57.0 | 153.1 | 176.9 | 121.3 | 76.2 | 32.2 | 3.5 |
| BOLIVIA | 43.8 | 190.5 | 226.1 | 190.3 | 136.4 | 80.1 | 49.3 |
| BRAZIL | 90.0 | 254.0 | 273.0 | 223.0 | 167.0 | 110.0 | 47.0 |
| CHILE | 71.7 | 174.2 | 159.0 | 101.2 | 119.2 | 63.3 | 13.7 |
| COLOMBIA | 83.2 | 247.6 | 299.3 | 245.3 | 176.9 | 74.3 | 27.5 |
| ECUADOR | 94.2 | 295.3 | 326.8 | 254.1 | 185.8 | 78.0 | 29.6 |
| PERU | 69.7 | 229.6 | 276.2 | 225.8 | 137.5 | 60.1 | 23.9 |
| VENEZUELA | 120.5 | 277.0 | 300.9 | 230.0 | 137.9 | 68.4 | 31.6 |

* For the periods specified in Table 1, and from the same source.

30. The fertility rate is already very low in the 40-44 years group, but in fourteen countries it exceeds 50 per 1,000, and - if we exclude the Brazilian rate, probably too high - the Bolivian and Dominican maxima attain 80, while the corresponding rate is only 16 per 1,000 in the United States and is even lower in some Western Europe countries. The Latin American minimum, 32 per 1,000 in Argentina, is double the United States rate.

31. Even in the 45-49 years group, when in the other countries of Western civilization the fertility is nearly exhausted, we find rates higher than 20 per 1,000 in eight Latin American countries, with maxima - if we exclude the probably exaggerated Brazilian and Bolivian rates - of 32 and 30 per 1,000 in Venezuela and Ecuador.

32. The analysis of fertility by age groups has shown the characteristics of the dominant Latin American type, that is, the precocious beginning and the long continuation of intense reproductive activity. These characteristics appear more evident by the comparison between the fertility rates of Mexico (as representative of the Latin American type) and those of West Germany (of the Western European type).

33. If we take as a basis ( =100 ) the value of the German fertility rate in each age group, we obtain, as index number of the corresponding Mexican rate, 930 for the 15-19 years age group, 219 for the 20-24 group, 203 for the 25-29 group, and then, in progressive ascent, 269 for the 30-34, 281 for the 35-39, 429 for the 40-44 and 1,252 for the 45-49 years age group.

34. These variations of the index numbers clearly indicate that birth control, widely practised in Northern America and in Western Europe, is not yet customary in Latin America. Only in some countries which deviate from the dominant type, as Argentina and Uruguay, birth control seems to be already well known; in other countries it is beginning to be used specially in the larger cities, sometimes more in the primitive form of induced abortion than in that of contraception.

35. The high frequency of consensual unions, early marriages and the absence of birth control contribute to the high birth and fertility rates of this region.

36. The census data on the number of all children born declared by women past the childbearing age give other evidence of the high Latin American fertility.

37. For mothers aged 50 years and over, the average number of children born alive attains 7-6 in Brazil, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, Panama, Argentina, and exceeds 5 in several other countries.

38. These women belong to older generations, who nearly ignored birth control; therefore they have numerous offspring even in countries, such as Puerto Rico and Argentina, where the younger generations know and practise it.

39. The present situation is better indicated by the statistics of live-birth order. In Costa Rica, Colombia, Trinidad and Tobago and Puerto Rico the proportion of the live born averaging 5 or more varies between 35 and 26 percent, while in the United States it attains only 9 percent and in some Western European countries it falls below 5 percent.

40. At first sight, considering the ample natural resources of the region and its still relatively scarce population, it may seem that the rapid demographic increase of Latin America is not likely to hinder its economic development.

41. But a careful examination of the present situation, characterized by the backward state of the productive organization, the scarceness of capital, the deficiencies of general and technical education, shows evidently that a too rapid demographic increase contributes to retard the needed rise of the low prevailing standard of living. This increase requires a large expense of goods and services, which could be better employed, at least in part, for the improvement and diversification of the agricultural and industrial production and for the development of communications, transports, power plants and other collective instruments of economic progress and welfare.



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